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IDAHO CORRIDOR PLANNING AND NATIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY ACT INTEGRATION GUIDE

Preface

The Idaho Transportation Board approved the long-range corridor planning process outlined in the Idaho Corridor Planning Guidebook and implemented policies in February 1998. Corridor plans, developed from the process outlined in the guidebook, identify a comprehensive package of recommendations for managing and improving the transportation system within and along a specific corridor based on a 20-year planning horizon.

The Idaho Transportation Department's (ITD) Corridor Planning Team is made up of Transportation Planning Division staff, Division of Highways Environmental and Right-of-Way staff, District Transportation Planners, Local Highway Technical Assistance Council (LHTAC) staff, and Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) representatives. This team concluded that substantial value can be added to both the planning and project development processes through improved integration of Idaho's Corridor Planning Guidebook process with the federal environmental review process, more commonly referred to as National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) requirements.

The keys to the success of this Corridor Planning/NEPA Integration Guide are regular participation by FHWA, as well as local and resource agencies, along with coordinated work efforts that focus on connecting needs to solutions. The following integration guide is built on a range of options for NEPA involvement with corridor planning through scoping, project and cumulative assessments, and alternatives analysis, including documentation of alternatives considered (see Corridor Planning/NEPA Decision Matrix). This guide identifies a number of procedural options for local agency and district office consideration and application.

Introduction

There are three components of the Corridor Planning/NEPA Integration Guide: 1) Assessment; 2) Selection and Implementation; and 3) Evaluation and Recommendation. At each district's own choosing, this guide can direct actions by creating options for them to utilize.

This guide has been deemed a pilot project, effective for two years from May 10, 2002. At the end of the two year period, the ITD Corridor Planning Team will review the effectiveness of this guide, and determine if any modifications are warranted. Once this review is completed, the guide (with any changes) will become final, and will be incorporated as an addendum to ITD's Corridor Planning Guidebook, and relevant changes will be made to the applicable Board and Administrative policies.

Assessment Component

The first action identified is that an Interagency Advisory and Assessment Team (IAAT) be formed for currently identified and future State Highway System (or local) corridors for which a corridor plan is being contemplated. The IAAT partners will consist of ITD district personnel (Sr. Transportation Planner, Sr. Environmental Planner, Project Development staff, and others as required), as well as appropriate resource and local agency representatives. The Headquarters Intermodal Planning and Environmental Sections, the FHWA Area Engineer, the FHWA Transportation Planner and a consultant (when applicable) could be involved. Since ITD retains the lead role in transportation planning functions for the State of Idaho, regulatory decisions will be deferred until projects are sufficiently developed to justify NEPA involvement. Therefore, the District Sr. Transportation Planner would remain as the corridor planning lead, with the IAAT providing advice and input as needed. Early involvement and issue identification would drive the final makeup of a particular IAAT.

The team would assist in developing the summary and detailed scope of work for the corridor plan by:

- Compiling and assessing information about known issues and needs;
- Reviewing a series of questions to determine the appropriate approach;
- Recommending the best approach from the five matrix options;
  (please refer to Corridor Planning/NEPA Decision Matrix)
- Implementing the approach; and
- Evaluating the original conclusions upon completion of the plan.

The team assessment effort could be undertaken at different phases of the Corridor Planning process or on a continuous basis to assess the effectiveness and appropriateness of the chosen approach.

Assessment Review of Known Issues and Needs

Examples of corridor level issues to consider in the initial Corridor Planning/NEPA evaluation include the following (either identified as "to be evaluated" or utilizing known information, as chosen by IAAT):

Corridor Characteristics

Geometry of the corridor (length and width)
Predominance of a single route within the corridor (single route focus?)
Setting of the corridor (urban, rural)
Traffic characteristics of the corridor (volume, trip type, trip length, vehicle types, seasonality)
Existing transportation modes (autos, buses, pedestrian/bicycle)
Existing programmed projects status (independent utility and logical termini)
Inventories of existing social, economic and environmental resources and conditions
Evaluation of potential economic, social and environmental consequences
Evaluations of transportation needs and benefits, other benefits, costs and consequences

Corridor Needs

Type (capacity, safety, mobility, access, condition)
Scope (corridor wide or otherwise)
Timing (long term or short term)
Purpose and Need

Potential Solutions

Types (lane additions, interchange additions or changes, operational improvements, pavement and structure improvements, alternative modes, transportation demand management)
Scope (corridor wide or otherwise)
Independence or autonomy (independent utility, logical termini, and elimination of alternatives)
Timing (short term, long term, or otherwise)

Other Factors

Level of controversy for the corridor and/or the potential recommendations
Any other applicable information

Selection and Implementation Component

Questions for review and consideration by the Interagency Advisory and Assessment Team would be:

- Are near-term or long-term projects currently programmed?
- Should these projects be included or excluded from the corridor plan?
- Is it possible that projects are likely to emerge before a corridor plan is completed?
- What type and scope of recommendations are anticipated from the plan? Near-term or long-term planning?
- What are the requirements and/or expectations for the level, depth, and duration of public involvement?
- What approach avoids retracing planning and/or NEPA steps?
- Should this be part of a broader multi-corridor plan (e.g., all north-south or east-west routes in a given area) or regional analysis?
- What type of NEPA involvement is appropriate, if any, given the decisions to be made?
- Review of the matrix of possible approaches to 1) decide if the corridor plan is "With-NEPA" or "Pre-NEPA;" 2) choose to spin off or defer pipeline project(s) as appropriate; and 3) consider planning and NEPA issues, such as alternatives, timing, agency roles and responsibilities, funding, etc.
- Do the participants agree on a recommended approach? If yes, begin corridor plan as appropriate.

Selection from the Corridor Planning/NEPA Decision Matrix

The following matrix summarizes a series of five approaches that can coordinate and integrate Corridor Planning and NEPA to various degrees. Each approach summarizes the relative advantages, disadvantages, and conditions under which the approach is most applicable. The lower the approach number, the higher the level of integration between corridor planning and NEPA. For example, Approach No. 1 is a fully integrated corridor plan, where NEPA is part and parcel of the work effort. At the other end of the range, Approach No. 5 is a pre-corridor planning/NEPA approach for projects that have not been designated as part of a corridor plan.

Corridor Planning/NEPA Decision Matrix (Approaches 1 through 5)

No.	*Approach*	*Advantages*	*Disadvantages*	*Most Appropriate*
1.	**Make corridor improvement decisions only within the formal NEPA process.** ***(With-NEPA Corridor Plan)*** ***EIS* – Environmental Impact Statement** ***DEIS* – Draft Environmental Impact Statement** ***EA* – Environmental Assessment**	Decisions are made under the NEPA umbrella. Likely to generate formal resource and local agency attention. Process is usually well understood, less chance of confusion. Elimination and selection of alternatives is most defensible when conducted in conjunction with the NEPA process. Can begin as an EA and transition to an EIS where the potential significance of impacts can be confirmed.	Requires Federal signatures, less local autonomy than if done outside of NEPA. Document has a 3-year shelf life. Developers must be prepared to keep moving. Potential corridor plan schedule delays because of environmentally significant issues. Multiple projects resulting from a planning study could require additional environmental documentation. Additional work developing consultant scopes of work is required by ITD Districts/FHWA Area Engineers.	When agencies expect projects will keep moving through project development and construction (i.e., document is unlikely to lapse). When significant streamlining of the planning and project development process is necessary.

No.	*Approach*	*Advantages*	*Disadvantages*	*Most Appropriate*
2.	**Conduct a tiered EIS*.** **Tier 1 conducted for alignment selection, design concept and scope decisions (or possibly corridor protection). From initial tiered EIS, subsequent environmental documents are prepared to address discrete projects within logical termini.** ***(With-NEPA Corridor Plan)*** *Note: No Idaho-specific experience in this type of environmental documentation.	Decisions are made under the NEPA Umbrella. Likely to generate formal resource and local agency attention. Federal signatures on Tier 1 reinforce design concept and scope decision. Amount of information in each tier can be tailored to needs.	Requires education of resource agencies and public as to objectives of plan. Could confuse public if not properly explained. Requires two drafts and a final EIS, including all necessary agency signatures. Potential corridor plan schedule delays because of environmentally or locally significant issues, reviews and approvals. Additional work developing consultant scopes of work is required by ITD Districts/FHWA Area Engineers.	Where Federal buyoff on design concept and scope helps cement decision. When it would help the lead agency focus on the issues that are ready for decision, while excluding those that are already decided or not yet matured. When significant time lag is expected between planning decision and project development. When corridor protection is an issue. When some streamlining of the planning and project development process is necessary.

No.	*Approach*	*Advantages*	*Disadvantages*	*Most Appropriate*
3.	**Prepare less detailed DEIS* for the design concept and scope decision, with expectations of a Supplemental DEIS or new DEIS for project development decisions.** **Also identified as the integrated planning and project development guidance approach.** ***(With-NEPA Corridor Plan)*** *Note: No Idaho-specific experience in this type of environmental documentation.	Approach is likely to generate formal resource and local agency attention. Provides flexibility on level of detail for DEIS, commensurate with what is required to make a decision on design concept and scope. Provides flexibility in whether to move ahead immediately into project development or wait. Less detailed EIS could lower costs and expedite schedules.	Resource agencies may expect more detail than DEIS is intended to provide. Some education of stakeholders may be needed. Supplemental DEIS may be necessary to provide additional environmental detail to achieve regulatory approval. Potential corridor plan schedule delays because of environmentally or locally significant issues. Additional work developing consultant scopes of work is required by ITD Districts/FHWA Area Engineers.	When agencies are not sure whether there will be a time lag between planning decision and project development. When Federal involvement in DEIS (but not necessarily buyoff) is viewed to be a positive aspect. When some streamlining of the planning and project development process is necessary.

No.	*Approach*	*Advantages*	*Disadvantages*	*Most Appropriate*
4.	**Initiate NEPA scoping process to begin the corridor plan, but do not prepare draft and final NEPA documents until later, when project development begins. Also described as the middle ground approach between the traditional NEPA process and making decisions outside of the NEPA process.** ***(With-NEPA Corridor Plan)***	Allows corridor plan to take the place within the umbrella of NEPA. Obligates resource agencies to become more involved in the process. Does not require Federal signatures until project development. Planning decisions made locally. Environmental scans could inform future project-level environmental documentation, especially for cumulative and secondary impacts.	Resource agencies may be unclear about their role and obligations under this approach. Responsibilities and expectations of all parties would need to be clearly understood and explained. May require preparation of Notice of Intent (NOI) and conduct of a scoping process, if Draft EIS is anticipated. Potential corridor plan schedule delays because of environmentally or locally significant issues. Additional work developing consultant scopes of work is required by ITD Districts/FHWA Area Engineers.	When there is a concern about making decisions outside the NEPA umbrella, but it is viewed to be premature to initiate NEPA documentation. When some streamlining of the planning and project development process is necessary.

No.	*Approach*	*Advantages*	*Disadvantages*	*Most Appropriate*
5.	**Conduct corridor plan outside of formal NEPA process. Follow with NEPA documentation at appropriate time.**	Provides greatest local flexibility. If study is conducted well, most information can usually be confirmed and incorporated into NEPA record.	Resource agencies may take study less seriously. Heightens possibility of revisiting decisions if study eliminates certain alternatives outside of NEPA umbrella.	When a multi-corridor plan is appropriate, with expectation of multiple recommended projects.
	Recognize planning documentation and associated decisions in the NOI and at scoping meeting. **Confirm acceptability of analysis and conclusions there.** **Particular focus should be given to statements of problems, comparative data among alternatives, and descriptions of alternatives considered but eliminated**. ***(Pre-NEPA Corridor Plan)***	Have the option to initiate EIS/EA when appropriate, or "spin-off" projects to EIS/EA even in the middle of the planning process. Based on what is necessary to make a recommendation, environmental analysis should match detail appropriately.	Public participation could decrease, as they are confronted with too many public meetings to attend.	When significant time lag is expected between planning decision and project development. When a more streamlined planning and project development process is not necessary.

Evaluation and Recommendation Component

At the conclusion of a corridor plan, a final evaluation of the corridor needs, problems, and solutions should be conducted. Approaches 1 through 4 include NEPA components, which will have different outputs based on the context and level of NEPA activity. Approach 5 is pre-NEPA, and is therefore only a transportation planning document. As available and feasible, the following information should be included in the post-plan evaluation and recommendation documentation:

- Identification of project level needs and problems within the corridor.
- Identification of an array of feasible and recommended project level solutions across corridor.
- Recommendations for developing project level solutions through the NEPA, including:
    - Independence of proposed project improvements (based on independent utility, logical termini, and elimination of alternatives).
    - Level of environmental documentation (CE, EA or EIS) appropriate to each independent project (based on level of potential impacts, and controversy).
    - Timing for advancing projects in the NEPA development stage (based on anticipated purpose and need and priority for projects).